

THE SCOTTISH VIRGIL (?):
HENRYSON'S VIRGILIAN CAREER

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He assured himself that the chest with the manuscript of the *Aeneid* stood undisturbed near him, and, blinking into the deeply sinking western day-star, he pulled his robe up to his chin; he was cold. (Herman Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, 16)

As my subtitle specifies, the main title of this essay refers not to the *Eneados* of Gavin Douglas—the revealing trope of collapsing authors and their works was already fully functional in antiquity and despite the turn from “work to text” continues unabated today.¹ Rather my intention here is to explore the inheritance of a paradigmatic poetic corpus, specifically the influence of the *Vitae Virgilii* on Robert Henryson’s deliberate self-fashioning of a poetic career. The medieval lives and (to a lesser extent) the legends of Virgil offered the Scot an authoritative paradigm, a career path in graduated steps worthy of both veneration and imitation. To follow in the footsteps of Virgil’s poetic development was for Henryson a way of making his own poetry practice what it so insistently preaches, the virtue of prudence. In this turn from formalism and Chaucerianism in the study of Henryson, I am following a trail blazed by a number of recent scholars, perhaps chief among them Robert Kindrick. Professor Kindrick has done as much as anyone to challenge the reigning Chaucerian approach to Henryson.² He traced the poet’s broad and deep response to the medieval arts of rhetoric as evidence of Henryson’s internationalism (1993) as well as his particular didactic/political situation within fifteenth-century Scotland (1984). Kindrick even ventured to posit a source other than Chaucer for *The Testament of Cresseid* (1998). And though it was never intended to supersede the scholarly edition of Denton Fox, Kindrick’s teaching edition of Henryson’s complete works for the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (1997) should be consulted by anyone working on the poet.³ As we celebrate the distinguished career

of a valued colleague, I want to use this opportunity to begin to reflect on the career of the poet to whom he turned repeatedly throughout his scholarly life. In Kindrick's work Henryson emerges as a deliberate poet, perhaps concerned more than any other late medieval writer with the poet's role as a teacher and the centrality of rhetoric and hermeneutics in saving the texts of pagan *fenyit fables*.

Scottish Chaucerian, formalist, and, more latterly, Scottish nationalist interpretive frameworks have, I believe, tended to obscure the deliberate design of Henryson's poetic career, as well as the profound interrelatedness of his three major works: *The Moral Fables*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and *The Testament of Cresseid*. Henryson's deliberation encompasses more than a self-consciously rhetorical poetics and allegorical self-exegesis, it extends to the paradigmatic structure of his three major works based on the Virgilian model of a poetic career. My task here then is threefold: first, to sketch the Virgilian model and its influence; second, to put the case for Henryson's use and adaptation of this model; and last, briefly to suggest some of the ways in which reading the major poems as components in a larger, premeditated *ordo* may help us to see from a broader perspective his response to the challenge of revisioning ancient literature for an audience that included the classroom as well as the court.

Speculations about Virgil's biography begin quite early; the most well known of these is the probably apocryphal opening to the *Aeneid*, which was included in many manuscripts of the poem throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Aelius Donatus (following a lost life written by Suetonius) as well as Servius and St. Jerome, the grammarian's most famous students, assume that these lines were removed by Lucius Varius and Plotius Tucca, friends of Virgil reportedly given the task of editing the still unfinished manuscript of the *Aeneid* after the poet's death:⁴

Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena
Carmen, et egressus silvis vicina coegi
Ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono,
gratum opus agricolis, at nunc horrentia Martis
Arma virumque cano... (VT, 186)⁵

I am he who once tuned my song on a slender reed,
then leaving the woodland, compelled the neighboring fields
to serve the husbandman, however grasping—
a work welcome to farmers, but now of Mars' bristling
arms and the man I sing... (VT, 194)

These lines inspired the openings of monumental works in the western tradition from Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* through Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, though both authors only reference a single change from one genre and style to another.⁶ The triadic nature of Virgil's poetic career is also featured in the almost certainly apocryphal epitaph for the poet's tomb quoted by Donatus:

Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
Parthenope; cecini pascua rura duces.

Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians snatched me
away. Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures,
plowlands, leaders. (VT, 185 & 193)

The idea of a life's work conceived as a poetic trilogy in accordance with an ascending scale of stylistic and topical *gravitas*, the work of, in Lawrence Lipking's happy phrase, "husbanding a career" (77), has held a fascination for poets and readers alike for over two millennia. Milton still sees the pattern as a crucial, if not obligatory path in the late seventeenth century and it profoundly influences Alexander Pope's poetic career in the eighteenth. Medieval English poets were more reserved about their poetic aspirations, but once one begins to look for this triadic pattern it appears, *mutatis mutandis* ubiquitous. Even in William Langland, that indefatigable maker of one poem, we have three major versions, each longer than its predecessor. The virtuoso Gower writes three major works, the French *Speculum hominis*, the Latin *Vox clamantis*, and the English *Confessio amantis*.

John of Garland is responsible for the development of a schema in the *Parisiensia Poetria* that has both delighted and enraged critics of genre and style. In his *Rota Virgilii*, John devises a mnemonic device that features a trisected circle with a series of concentric rings, each wedge of the circle listing the stylistic level, social rank of human beings, literary characters, animals, implements, places, and trees characteristic of each of Virgil's three poems. Rendered in tabular order

from circumference to center the *Rota Virgilii* takes the form shown in Figure 1.⁷ John's schema descends ultimately from Donatus who first popularized the notion that Virgil's three works exemplify the high, middle, and low styles. Details of the *Rota Virgilii* are drawn from material widely available in medieval commentaries, *accessus*, and lives of Virgil. Alistair Fowler in his *Kinds of Literature* calls John's mnemonic diagram "misleading and confusing," but also notes its "vital" influence on later generic systems (241). If taken as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive schema, however, the *Rota* does provide quite an elegant diagram of stylistic differences.

More original perhaps is John's association of the three styles with the three estates, an association that underlines late medieval uses of the book of Virgil as a compendium or encyclopedia. A number of critics have tried to adapt the schema to Chaucer's stylistic virtuosity. John Fisher reads the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* as a deployment of three stylistic levels, linked to the character types of "courtier, citizen and peasant," and although this is a far cry from the *rota*'s typical characters (the triumphant soldier, the farmer, and the peaceful shepherd), quite a self-conscious virtuosity in style and genre is clearly on display in the concatenation of the Knight's, the Miller's and the Reeve's tales. Joseph A. Dane has seen in the three books of the *House of Fame* a correspondence to the *rota Virgilii*, which moves, he claims, from epic to georgic to bucolic. Should we be inclined to accept these analyses, we are left with two very pertinent questions. First, why does Chaucer employ a scheme devised to structure a life's work in such restricted, limited contexts? And second, why does he always have it backwards, descending from epic to georgic to bucolic and from high to middle to low styles? We might answer the first question by conceding the fragmentary and always evolving nature of Chaucer's works. He may have known what path the ideal poet's career was supposed to pursue, without having the time—or the inclination—to follow it himself, though he enjoyed engaging the formula within the context of particular works as a kind of self-degrading send-up of vatic mastery, a poetics *peri bathos*. The discovery of the works of Boccaccio relatively late in Chaucer's life surely had an enormous effect on the direction of his poetic career—Boccaccio's early career writing in the vernacular, unlike that of Dante and Petrarch, moves from epic to a frame tale collection with multiple narrators. Yet for me the second question is potentially much more heuristic. Chaucer must

Figure 1

***humilis stilus* (low style)**

pastor otiosus (peaceful shepherd)
Tytirus/Melibeus
ouis (sheep)
baculus (crook)
pascua (pasture)
fagus (beech)

***mediocris stilus* (middle style)**

agricola (farmer)
Tritololemus/ Ceres
bos (cow)
aratrum (plow)
ager (field)
pomus/ pirus (apple/pear tree)

***gravis stilus* (high style)**

miles dominans (military leader)
Hector/Ajax
equus (horse)
gladius (sword)
urbs/castrum (city/camp)
laurus/cedrus (laurel/cedar)

have known that the model was teleological, that one moved as one matured to ever longer, more complex, and more stylistically elevated works. If Dane and Fisher are correct about Chaucer's use of the *rota* in the "First Fragment" of the *Canterbury Tales* and in *The House of Fame*, then we are left with a poet deliberately reversing the master scheme of poetic development, unmaking, undoing, deflating his own ambitions—going as it were the wrong way on a one-way street or taking a ride on the *rota* from high to low that duplicates the bathetic trajectory of those on Fortune's wheel.

In Henryson's major works we encounter a more serious and pervasive use of the Virgilian model of a poetic career than in any British author before Edmund Spenser. The *Vita Virgilii* of Donatus had established that each of Virgil's masterworks was based primarily on the imitation of a single Greek authority: *The Eclogues* on Theocritus, *The Georgics* on Hesiod, and *The Aeneid* on Homer. The number of separate poems in Virgil's triadic poetic career was 15: 10 eclogues, 4 georgics, and the epic *Aeneid*. Henryson's three works parallel this number: there are 13 *Moral Fables*, as well as the *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *The Testament of Cresseid*, for a total of 15 separate poems. Each of Henryson's three works is also putatively based upon a Latin author: The *Fables* on Aesop (Gualterus Anglicus), the *Orpheus* on Boethius, and the *Testament*—on "sum poeit," who presumably like Chaucer's Lollius is imagined as writing in Latin, whether it be "authoreist" or "fenyit of the newe." Here, however, the use of authorities becomes significantly complicated. The *Fables* are composed from a number of sources, including Gualterus Anglicus, Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," as well as the *Esopes* of Lydgate—and of course Aesop himself wrote in Greek! The *Orpheus* really has two *auctores*: the fable itself does derive from the last metrum in Book 3 of Boethius's *Consolatio* (also set in the medial position of the work), but the *moralitas* translates the commentary of the "famous clerk" Nicholas Trevet. And the *Testament* is of both double and dubious authority: it is presented ambiguously as an (il)legitimate alternate version of the fifth book of Chaucer's *Troilus*, when in fact what Henryson actually writes is a parodic and ironic imitation of it, contrived as far as we can tell "throw his (own) inuention" (67). What Henryson's works do though share with the Virgilian model is an ideal of cultural appropriation and translation from one country and its literature to another. As Virgil stands in relation to his Greek authorities, so does Henryson stand in relation to English writers:

Gualterus and Lydgate as translators of Aesop, Chaucer as the poet of "The Nun's Priest's Tale," the *Troilus*, as well as the translator of Boethius into English, and the English Dominican Nicholas Trevet.

The sense of Henryson's three works as contributions to a prudentially ordered poetic corpus perhaps also derives from their extensive use of rhyme royal. Ancient and medieval commentators emphasize that each of Virgil's three works is in dactylic hexameter, itself often associated with epic poetry. In Henryson's almost exclusive use of rhyme royal throughout the three poems, we have perhaps an exemplary instance of his melding of Chaucerian and Virgilian ideas of authorship.⁸ Chaucer's own beast fable is in rhyming couplets; he saves rhyme royal for works in the high style like *The Monk's Tale* and the *Troilus*. We may speculate that here Henryson sought to compromise, putting the vast majority of his three works in the Chaucerian stanza of the elevated style and in so doing remaining faithful to the Virgilian example of a lofty meter employed throughout a corpus of varied genres and styles.

The sense that one has in moving from the *Fables* through the *Orpheus* to the *Testament* is that of a progressive complication, with more and more emphasis being placed upon the reader's interpretive faculties. Henryson's didactic corpus can be read as akin to a schoolmaster's syllabus, which offers progressively more challenging works to students. The oeuvre begins with the short Aesopian fables, a medieval standard for teaching the basics of reading and interpretation to younger students, and moves on to the longer and more elaborate "fenyit fable" of Orpheus's tragic *catabasis*, the *moralitas* of which includes 215 lines of learned commentary, gleaned from the "noble theologe," "doctour Nicholass," whose readings, such as that glossing the rapist Aristaeus as "gude vertew," certainly throw into sharp relief the distinction between literal and figurative senses. With the *Testament* we apparently move from fables and mythography to history, though this too is possibly "fenyit," without ancient authority, and also without any appended allegorical gloss. As the final work in the series, *The Testament* offers its readers—presumably instructed by the earlier self-glossing texts—a *work to be interpreted*, a work to which readers themselves must supply the gloss. Not surprisingly, the meaning of the *Testament* is the most hotly contested of all the poet's works among modern scholars. For at the end Henryson flatly tells us that he will say "no moir" about his heroine. The series thus trains the reader with short fables followed by short exegeses, then turns to a

substantial classical myth, followed by a complex and learned commentary, saving the longest, most difficult and ambiguous poem of all, one apparently of Henryson's own invention as a kind of final exam.

While there is insufficient space here to treat the three works in great detail, I'd like to begin unpacking some of the parallels one can draw between the genres of the Virgilian wheel and Henryson's works. Obviously, there are real differences between the bucolic genre of Virgil's *Eclogues* and Henryson's beast fables, yet there are also a great many cogent similarities.⁹ Both are comprised of short poems, typically gathered into collections, amenable to scattered topical and theological allegory. They favor rural settings and feature country folk. The *rota* associates the bucolic with the low style, and Henryson also claims in the "Prologue" to the *Moral Fables* to be writing "in hamlie language and in termes rude" (36). The difference between animals and people is bridged by a "syllogisme:"

How many men in operatioun
Ar like to beistis in conditioun. (48-49)

He goes on to explain "lust and appetite" can become so deeply rooted in man, "That he in brutal beist is transformate" (56). It seems that for Henryson a low "conditioun" is less a matter of economic means than of moral worth.

In one telling instance the indebtedness of the *Moral Fables* to the Virgilian tradition goes beyond generic decorum to complex allusion and even broad parody. The fourth eclogue (*Sicelides Musae, Paulo maiora canamus/ Sicilian Muses, let us sing a somewhat loftier strain*) represents one of the most crucial texts in the Virgilian tradition. Thought to foretell the birth of Christ, this eclogue was probably the ultimate source as well of the later legends that made Virgil a soothsayer and a magician.¹⁰ Nicholas Trevet's commentary on the fourth eclogue is a possible source for Henryson's 'syllogism:'

nam "si canimus" vel describimus "silvas," id est,
pastoralia aut gesta mundanorum hominum pene more
bestiarum, nunc in silvis errantium, post idola tempusut
de "consule" rectore futuro ipsarum silvarum canamus...
(VT, 753)

For "if I sing about" (or describe) "forests," that is pastoral things or the deeds of earthly men who are almost like beasts, wandering around in the forests after idols, it is time for me to sing about the "consul" and the future ruler of the forests themselves... (VT, 763)

Unlike most of the fables in the collection, Henryson's fourth fable, "The Fox and the Wolf," derives from no single classical or medieval fable, but rather is composed of elements either invented outright or elaborated from a number of different traditions. Denton Fox suggests four distinct elements: the fox's confession, the baptism of the kid, the fox's death, and the fox as astrologer (222-23). Yet these elements begin to cohere if we read the fable as a broad, even demonic parody of Virgil's supposed prophecy of a golden age.

Just as in Virgil's fourth eclogue, Henryson's fourth fable marks a distinct change in tone from the mundane to the heavenly. In parallel with the opening of the fourth eclogue there is a notable shift to the high style as Henryson describes the coming of night:

Quhill that Thetis, the goddes off the flude,
Phebus had callit to the harbery,
And Hesperous put of his cluddie hude,
Schawand his lustie visage in the sky. (621-24)¹¹

The equation of the demonic fox with the vatic astrologer Virgil is a surprising parallel, yet one perhaps authorized by the comic prophet of the Virgilian legends, who more than once runs afoul of his own cleverness. The parody is in keeping with Henryson's oft-remarked distrust of prophecy and his tendency to twist astrological configurations in astronomically impossible though ironically significant ways. Virgil's astrology heralds the return of a golden age with the return of Astrea, the goddess of Justice; just as Henryson's complicated map of the heavens (Jupiter in Sagittarius the Archer, Saturn in Capricorn the Goat) suggests the poetic justice of the tale, wherein the Fox's murder of the kid calls down a vengeance at once divine and human.¹² In keeping with the *rota's* paradigm for the low style, the human character in the tale is a shepherd, albeit one anything but *otiosus*. The *hird* is in fact the hand of divine justice whose arrow finds the otiose fox tempting fate in a posture emblematic of the

Virgilian eclogues, recumbent “under a busk” (756).¹³ The fourth fable’s insistent *parodiae sacrae* has the fox send up first the notion of the Virgin Birth foretold in the heavens (this perhaps is the point of putting Mercury, the patron god of poets in Virgo), then the sacrament of confession as told to “Freir Volff Waitskaith,” and finally the baptismal fount, as the kid fatally christened by the fox, enjoined to go down as a kid and come up as a salmon. In Virgil’s golden age the sheep will dye their own wool; Henryson’s Lowrence imagines a transformation no less miraculous, though significantly more irreverent in its parody of symbols for Christ. Lowrence is a diabolical fisherman. The crowning parody, though, comes in the movement from the fourth to fifth fables. Nicholas Trevet categorized Virgil’s messianic eclogue as a *genethliacon*, *id est vaticinium nativitatis cuiusdam pueri quem quidam dicunt Saloninum fuisse, filium Asinii Pollionis* (a *genethliacon*, that is, the prophecy of the birth of a child, who in this case some claim was Saloninus, the son of Asinius Pollio [VT, 751 and 761]). The Virgilian valorization of heredity and prophecy, leading to the perfection of a family line and a golden age is mocked in Henryson’s version by the miraculous appearance in Fable #5 of the bastard Lowry after the death of his father.

This forsaied foxe that deit for his misdeid
 Had not ane barne wes gottin righteouslie
 That to his airschip nicht of law succed,
 Except ane sone, the quhilk in lemanrye
 He gottin had in purches priuelie,
 And till his name wes callit Father-war.... (796-803)

Worse than his father, this “bastard of generatioun” (807), will ultimately father the “werst of all” (805).²¹ Still, even Lowry, however degenerate, possesses some small portion of the preeminent Roman virtue. In a debased mockery of *pious Aeneas* he carries his (dead) father on his shoulders—“throw naturall pietie,/ The carrioun vpon his bak he tais” (824-5)—though he totes him only a short way: “Syne with the corps vnto ane peitpot gais/ Off watter full, and kest him in the deip/ And to the Deuill he gaif his banis to keip” (828-30).¹⁵ Engaging two chief texts in ancient representations of *pietas*, Henryson savages Roman as well as Scottish pride in family lineage: from his vantage point the virgin birth has come and gone, the world can only grow worse and worse, and human beings more and more like beasts.

The middle style is always perhaps the hardest to define with clarity, though certainly if I am correct in placing Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* in the center of the paradigm, I must then give reasons why this should be so. First among my reasons is again the example of Virgil, who closes his fourth and final Georgic with the *mythos* of Orpheus. What Henryson's notion of middle style might have been is difficult to discern, but it probably included the notion of mixture. This poem alone among his works employs three meters. Rhyme royal dominates the *fabula*, but the formal complaint of Orpheus is in ten-line stanzas, and the Trivet-inspired *moralitas* is in rhyming couplets. Certainly the poem begins with the praise of nobility and Orpheus is imagined as a king, but a Chaucerian understanding of "Gentilesse" intrudes in the second stanza:

It is contrair the lawis of nature
A gentill man to be degenerat,
Noucht following of his progenitour
The worthé rewll and the lordly estait;
A ryall rynk for to be rusticat
Is bot a monsture in comparesoun
Had in dispyt and foule derisoun. (8-14)

As in the "Prologue" to the *Moral Fables*, ethical failures debase human beings from their natural estates. We might also note that in this myth of kings and queens, it is a "busteous hird, callit Arresteuss" (a lower class shepherd, 97) who sets the tragedy in motion. And too, Orpheus's movements in the poem are forever "nedirmair" (nethermore, 210), down through the planets and into the underworld, wherefrom he fails to escape with his wife Eurydice, because he fails to rise without turning back. Medieval readers understood the structural inheritance of ancient epic with its tradition of a *catabasis* followed by an *anabasis* placed at the end of the middle as a transition between one part of the work and another. In this Virgil follows Homer's *Odyssey*, and his Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, along with the purportedly messianic fourth eclogue were largely responsible for Virgil's reputation for prophecy and magic throughout the later Middle Ages. Boethius himself employs the Orpheus myth in this way, reserving for it the pride of place as the last metrum of Book 3 in the five-book structure of *Consolatio Philosophiae*, just as Virgil had reserved the myth for the end of the last book of his *Georgics*, the medial work in the corpus.

The central placement of the Orphic *catabasis* in the works of Henryson is perhaps the strongest argument that can be made on literary historical grounds for taking his *Orpheus and Eurydice* as a medial work between the *Fables* and the *Testament*. A stylistic argument for the centering of the *Orpheus* could also be made according to late antique and medieval ideas of stylistic decorum. Following Quintillian, Donatus, and Diomedes, medieval discussions of literary kinds typically associate the low style with genres used to instruct the young, such as pastoral, riddles, comedy, Aesopian fables, and so on. The middle style is reserved for more advanced didactic works, providing instruction in law and ethics as well as the mechanical and liberal arts. While the elevated style is reserved for epic and panegyric works, which concern gods, heroes, and kings (see Moss, 69). Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* is easily the most elaborately didactic of all his works, a primer of planetary, musical, and infernal knowledge that employs the story of Orpheus as a frame to introduce the higher learning of the *Quadrivium*, particularly recondite concepts like the music of the spheres, the nine muses, and the *vita contemplativa*.

The most persuasive case that can be made for placing the *Orpheus* between the fables and the *Testament*, however, is based upon structural imitation. The lives and commentaries on Virgil and his works commonly note the use of ring structure in which the first line of the *Eclogues* is deliberately echoed in the last line of the *Georgics* (*Ecl.* 1. 1: *Tityre, tu, patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*; *Geo.* 4. 566: *Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi*). For Donatus this ring structure is a way for Virgil to close off his works, preventing later interpolations like the *Thyestes* from sneaking into the authoritative corpus (see VT, 186-87; 194-95). This topic quite naturally evokes for Donatus the legendary topics of the impermeability of Virgil's verses to corruption by later authors, as well as Virgil's own derivation from Homer. Yet most importantly this verse was taken widely throughout the Virgilian tradition (and is still understood by many scholars today) as a metatrophe for allegorical composition, for what are commonly called in medieval Latin commentaries *integumenta*.¹⁶ Henryson too opens his *Moral Fables* and closes his *Orpheus and Eurydice* with a self-echoing reference to integumental composition. The Prologue to the *Fables*:

Thocht feinyit fabilis of auld poetre
Be not al grunded vpon truth, yit than,

Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore
Richt plesand are vnto the eir of man;
And als the caus quhy thay first began
Wes to repreif the of thi misleuing,
O man, be figure of ane vthir thing. (*MF*, 1-7)

Clearly these lines are referenced in the opening lines of the commentary on the *Orpheus*:

Lo, worthy folk, Boece, that senature,
To wryte this fenyit fable take in cure,
In his gay buke of consolacioun,
For oure doctrine and gude instructioun;
Quhilk in the self, suppose it fenyit be,
And hid vnder the cloke of poesie,
Yit maister Trewit, doctour Nicholas,
Quhilk in his tyme a noble theolog was,
Applyis it to gude moralitee,
Richt full of frute and seriositee. (*O & E*, 415-24)

Though Henryson's metaphors for integumental composition eschew the shade of the spreading beech tree for the by then more conventional nutshell/ kernel and the cloak of poetry, still the echoes serve the same purposes in Henryson's works that they were purported to serve in Virgil's. Allegorical figures for allegorical figuration frame the myths in between as a sign of authenticity and as an assurance of authorial intention. Henryson's paratexts also function like the medieval *accessus* to Virgil, stressing the presence of integumenta and the derivation of the fables from prior authorities: Theocritus and Hesiod for Virgil, Aesop and Boethius for Henryson.

The final work in Henryson's *rota* is also his most difficult and controversial poem. The frame of the *Testament* represents Henryson's most original commentary on literary tradition, and it is here that that the oft-remarked combination of Chaucerian play and the anxiety of influence are most apparent. Henryson's library seems to include a Borgesean time warp: the very work he himself is composing already exists on his shelf alongside Chaucer's *Troilus*. High Medieval commentaries on the *Aeneid*, like the *pseudo-Silvestris Commentary*, as well as the *Vita Donati* and its host of recensions emphasized Virgil's full-scale, thorough *imitatio* of Homer. "Silvestris" maintains that

Virgil wrote a continuation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* steeped in Homeric language and episodes. The accusation that Virgil, like Homer, told lies was also widespread in the Middle Ages. Henryson situates his text as just such an invention. Like Virgil's entailment of the *Iliad*, the *Testament* continues the story told in the first four books of Chaucer's *Troilus*. And like Virgil's re-writing of the *Odyssey*, Henryson offers a parallel, alternative version of Cresseid's *nostos* to the house of her father, replete with strategic verbal echoes and significant revisions of scenes from his model's poem. Everyone knew that Virgil's epic was a bi-fold composition: an Iliadic and an Odyssean half, each composed of six books. Henryson's poem of 616 lines is clearly imagined as a counterpart to the fifth book of Chaucer's *Troilus*—a putative sixth book, though in this infamous "vther quair" the attention is not given, as it is in the Iliadic half of the *Aeneid* or in Book V of the *Troilus* to war and death on the battlefield of a native chieftain, but rather to a *nostos*, a return home and a reunion with a former love. Henryson offers an Odyssean supplement to Chaucer's Iliadic fifth book, returning Cresseid home to her father and to a bittersweet reunion with *Troilus*, though like Aeneas she *returns* to a place she has never been before, a foreign town of dangerous and deceitful inhabitants. Medieval commentators typically judge Virgil's *Aeneid* as being fundamentally different from the two earlier works. Unlike the fables and myths of the earlier works, the *Aeneid* is at least partially history. Aeneas, it was thought, really did flee from Troy—although contrary traditions disagreed about under what conditions—and he did conquer Latium, though many readers of the *Aeneid* knew, for instance, that Aeneas and Dido had lived more than 100 years apart or that, according to the medieval pseudo-histories of Troy, Virgil's hero was traitor to as well as founder of a city.¹⁷ The prevailing notion that Virgil's *Aeneid* was a mixture of history and fable largely derived from pastiched imitations of Homer offered Henryson a paradigm for his own self-consciously hybridized text, quite explicitly *both* "authoreist" and "fenyit of the newe" (66). Henryson invented a fable derived from a close imitation of Chaucer that, however fanciful, however replete with the pagan machinery of the false and lying gods, still contained truths common to both pagan and Christian eras, truths like the inherent falsity of erotic love.

Of all of Henryson's works *The Testament* adheres most closely to the minutiae of *rota Virgilioi*. The poem employs what A. C. Spearing famously called "the high concise style," pathetic narrative

passages of suffering and alienation in counterpoint with operatic set pieces, such as the Planet Portraits and Cresseid's "Complaint." John of Garland's diagram of stylistic decorum focuses on the classes of men appropriate to each level, advising that the *miles dominans* or "triumphant knight" is the figure exemplary of *gravis stilus*. The belated (and rather surprising) appearance of Troilus at the end of Henryson's poem, "with greit triumphe and laude victorious" (488), introduces just such a figure—though characteristically for Henryson, Troilus's triumph is mitigated and rendered more poignant by his encounter with the degraded Cresseid. John's Parisian poetics offers Hector and Ajax as ideal exemplars of the *miles dominans*, and as "Hector the secounde" Troilus fits neatly within the scheme. He rides a horse, armed for battle, through what Henryson calls a "toun." John of Garland claims that typical objects of the high style are a horse, a sword, and an *urbs* or *castum* (the Greek settlement in Henryson's Troy is a little of both). Troilus's return from the battlefield is described in terms analogous to a Roman triumph. With the death of Hector the young prince has become the Trojan "chiftane" (485). He and his contingent of followers ride "richt royallie" (489) back to the city, having come triumphantly through the "ieopardie of weir" and "strickken down/ knichtis of Grece in number marvelous" (486). Perhaps it is not going too far to suggest that more than just using the *rota* as a model Henryson's invention of this climactic scene was to some degree driven by it.

Finally, I want to touch on two ways that reading Henryson's major works as a deliberate trilogy, a "works," opens the poems to a more comprehensive approach. Seeing Henryson's poetic corpus as a premeditated whole encourages us to be alive to thematic coherence and sequential developments. Echoes between works at the micro level of diction and at the macro level of scene and structure deserve further attention. For example, all three major works are infused with tragic *failures of prudence*. The tragedy of Orpheus is a literal instance of this: he turns back to look at his wife, instead of looking ahead as he was warned to do. Both villains and victims in the *Fables* fail to be "war"—a favorite word of Henryson.¹⁸ Part of the mock-tragic world of the *Fables* (and the human failings they allegorize) is that pride and despair prevent characters as different as the cock of Fable #2, the fox of Fable #5, the birds of Fable #7, or the mouse of the unlucky thirteenth and last fable from following their own better instincts. Cresseid bemoans at length her own lack of prudence and then finally

offers herself as an example to other woman, encouraging them "to be war by me." Here Henryson's didactic and satiric styles merge: poetry can teach prudence but it does so by chronicling the very human nature of such failures in a dangerous and unforgiving world.

A second thematic strain common to all three works, indeed to the endings of all three, is what might be called *failures of transcendence*. In the final fable, the mouse and the frog are locked in a deadly struggle: good and evil it seems will perish together, until a kite swoops down to rescue them from the river, only to drop them upon a rock and devour their broken bodies. Of course, Orpheus and Eurydice also see daylight and then on the verge of safety the mortifying glance of Orpheus looks back upon the pale, leaden corpse he has both redeemed and killed. Troilus and Cresseid are also reunited momentarily, but the young knight, like Orpheus, sees only the leaden shadow of his former love, a glance that conjures her in memory as she was, but which is ultimately just as fatal for Cresseid as Orpheus's backward glance was for Eurydice. Henryson's alternative version not only denies Cresseid transcendence, but perhaps in rewriting Chaucer's ending even casts doubt upon the apotheosis of Troilus as well. If the Scot knew Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and the *Teseida*, as his knowledge of Italian and his probable stay in Italy make likely, he would have known this sublime ending was something Chaucer "wrait" that was not "trew," a false transcendence smuggled into the matter of Troy from the matter of Thebes.

The Virgilian model of a poetic career predisposed the structure and the order of Henryson's three major works. Henryson's poetic corpus is a model of the very virtue it so insistently teaches: prudence. As Robert Kindrick's discussion of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* demonstrates, *prudentia* is an essential quality of *inventio* (1993, pp. 60-62). Seeing the whole in all its parts and their connections *before* one begins is the mark of a writer well-schooled in the arts of poetry. He "that hath an hous to founde," in that master-builder Pandarus's formulation, "ne renneth nought the werk for to bygone/ with rakel hond but he wol bide a stounde,/ and sende his hertes line out fro withinne" (I, 1065-68). As Henryson knew, those who come before us help to give shape to what we do.

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Notes

¹ This is the familiar turn of post-structuralism, for which see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (49-55), and "From Work to Text" (56-64) in *The Rustle of Language*, as well as Michel Foucault "What is an Author" (1622-36) in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leitch. Latterly the balance has shifted again, returning us to the material culture of MSS and the historical horizons of reading practices. Yet renderings of the "death of the author" are themselves crucial in the production of the "works" of an author. Testamentary paratexts like those concerning Virgil or Chaucer (whether literal, ironic or *post hoc*) help to establish what *remains* as well as how works cohere in relation to a final, authoritative act. On paratexts see Genette.

² See Kindrick (1979, 1984, 1989, 1993).

³ But see also David J. Parkinson's more recent edition of Henryson for TEAMS (forthcoming).

⁴ For a trenchant sifting of the mostly unreliable evidence on Virgil's life see Horsfall, pp. 1-26.

⁵ From the so-called *Vita Suetonii Vulgo Donatiana*. Texts and translations of the Virgilian paratexts are taken from the important reference work, *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, Jan M. Ziolkowski and Michael C. J. Putnam, eds. (2008), hereafter cited parenthetically within the text as VT.

⁶ Boethius, employing a trope borrowed from the opening of Ovid's *Amores* (I, 1-4), finds himself "driven" (*peregi*) from the austerity of Virgilian hexameters into the harsher measures of elegiac couplets. Spenser's thorough identification with the ideal of the Virgilian career is richly exemplified in the movement from the *Shepherd's Calendar* to the *Faerie Queen* and from the periphery to the center of religious and nationalist politics. On Spenser's Virgilian career see especially Cheney, *Spenser's Famous Flight*; for a wider view of poetic careers in early modern Europe see the essays collected in *European Literary Careers*, ed. Cheney and de Armas.

⁷ My table is adapted from the wheel diagrams in VT (748-9), which in turn descend from Lawler's edition of John of Garland's *Parisiana Poetria* (40).

⁸ Rhyme royal stanzas predominate in all three of Henryson's major works. The *Moral Fables* are exclusively in rhyme royal; the *Orpheus and Eurydice* employs rhyme royal for the fable, ten-line stanzas for Orpheus's complaint, and couplets for the allegorical gloss; the *Testament of Cresseid* puts Cresseid's complaint in the nine-line stanza of Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*.

⁹ Both the bucolic and the beast fable genres were typically categorized by medieval *accessus* as being in the humble, low style and appropriate for younger students.

¹⁰ See Comparetti (96-103, 135-55, 239-76) and Ziolkowski and Putnam (825-1024). A new standard in the study of Virgilianism in the MSS of medieval England was set by Baswell (1995).

¹¹ Note that this elaborate announcement of night fall might be compared to that which marks the coming of Troy's final night in *Aeneid* (2. 250-1): "*Vertitur interea caelum et ruit Oceano nox, / involvens umbra magna terramque polumque / Myrmidonumque dolos*" (Meanwhile the sky revolves and night rushes from the ocean, wrapping in its mighty shade earth and heaven and the wiles of the Myrmidons)—text and translation from Fairclough and Goold. In Henryson's evocation of this famous passage day does indeed descend into the ocean, but (*dolus*, deceit) and the fatal heavens are not occluded by any clouds. The *dolus* of the fox is open for all to see. Quotations of Henryson are from the edition of Denton Fox, hereafter cited only by line number.

¹² On the significance of the planets and their astrological houses see Fox's discussion (p. 224) of the relevant stanza (635-41).

¹³ The opening line of the *First Eclogue* (*Tityre, tu, patulae recubans sub tegimine fagi*/ O Tityrus, relaxing beneath the shade of the spreading beech [my trans.]) is not only an emblem of leisure but also for medieval allegoresis a clear statement that the Virgil's *Eclogues* employ hidden meanings.

¹⁴ Of course the degeneration of the family line is itself a Virgilian insult. In Book 2 of the *Aeneid* Priam compares the impious Pyrrhus (*degener Neoptolemus*, 2. 549) to his father Achilles.

¹⁵ Compare *Aeneid*, 2. 707-9: “ergo age, care pater, cervici imponere nostrae;/ ipse subibo umeris, nec me labor iste gravabit./ quo res cumque cadent, unum et commune periculum,/ una salus ambobus erit.” (“Come then dear father, mount upon my neck, on my own shoulders I will support you, and this task will not weigh me down. However things may fall, we two will have one common peril, one salvation.”)

¹⁶ Note that both the modern English words “beech” and “book,” as well as the classical Latin *fagus* (beech tree), derive from the same Proto-Indo-European root **bhago-*. The intervening semantic shift was somewhere in Germanic where **bek-* must have denoted beech bark serving as a medium of runic inscription.

¹⁷ On the pseudo-historical materials see Benson (1980). For an engaging discussion of the “historical” Dido and a survey of the texts that attempt to negotiate the crux, see Desmond, *Reading Dido*, pp. 23-73.

¹⁸ On the use of wariness as a guard against the *indiscretus ictus* of Boethian Fortune in Henryson’s tragedies see my “The pane of Cresseid for to modifie: Robert Henryson’s Moral Tragedy” (62-72).

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